

INTRODUCTION TO NUPE KINSHIP

33

the existing political structure of the community in a kinship sense. The ancestors of the chief who are regarded as founders of the village are also thought of vaguely as ancestors of the whole community. These essentially mythical kinship links exercise no influence upon concrete kinship claims and obligations. 602

Political factors are also responsible for the development of the large units which characterize kinship among the ruling family. We shall see that the ruling house of Nupe crystallized in three dynasties, which trace their descent from different sons of the founder of the ruling house, and divide between them the rights and duties vested in the ruling house. The ancestors of the three dynasties lived only two or three generations back; but already certain religious observances (prayers on their grave) mark them off from all subsequent royal ancestors. In this rigidly defined system of reckoning descent in the father's line back to these almost sanctified 'first ancestors', and in the relationship with one another which is in the nature of mutual obligations for the sake of the larger unit, the royal house itself, the three dynasties correspond from kinship point of view to incipient *clans*—the only analogy to clan structure which we find in Nupe. 643 769 613

Let me say in conclusion that kinship structure in Nupe is not that dominant, all-enveloping structure which we know from many primitive societies. Although it bears upon religious life, education, and the organization of production, it is greatly overshadowed as a determinant of social behaviour by the factors of political organization and, in economic life, by economic interests proper. Indeed only because of its lesser significance in social life could we omit the detailed description of Nupe kinship from the sociological analysis with which this book is concerned. 601

THE NUPE CREED

25

notion was rejected by everybody else. A second view was more widely held, namely, that the *kuci* remains on earth but is watched by God, so that your appeal to the *kuci* will yet reach God; the *kuci*, then, would be 'with God' only in a metaphorical sense. A third informant argued as follows, with somewhat dubious logic: Since you cannot see either God or *kuci*, it follows that they are together. Finally, there was the unprofitable but incontrovertible reply, that here we have a mystery of which 'man is ignorant'.

If the Nupe failed to work out a clear and consistent conception of this survival of 'personal souls', they equally failed to exploit its potentialities. The belief in souls of the dead which remain concerned with the fate of their living kin and are reincarnated in progeny would seem to lend itself ideally to an ethical interpretation. Yet there is no trace of this. There is no conception of the *kuci* being angered by the sins or offences of the living, perhaps refusing its aid or sending punishment. In appealing to the *kuci* the suppliant expects help, not rewards, and help untempered with justice; the help may not come; but this only means that the circumstances were unfavourable or the difficulties too great. Nor is the fate of the soul after death affected by the deeds or character of the living person. It is the same for good men and evil, and the idea that the two might fare differently in the beyond is simply not understood. 'When a person dies, we no longer see him', is all the Nupe find to say on this topic. Which is another facet of that ethical indifference we noted before.

The *kuci* is invariably invoked in the ceremonials surrounding the crucial events of kinship life—birth, marriage, death. Apart from this, *kuci* worship has no special domain, nor is it subject to any regular routine. The sacrifices to ancestors represent casual appeals, performed *ad hoc*, for a variety of reasons, and nearly always on the advice of diviners. Of ten informants one had performed the sacrifice three times in the last four years, because of his ill-health; one had sacrificed twice, first because his horse was sick, and then because his child had smallpox; six informants had sacrificed once during that period—three because of illness, two because of a drought, and one for no particular reason and without consulting a diviner. One informant had performed no *kuci* sacrifice for seven years, and another had sacrificed regularly every year; but he was a village chief, and in his case the sacrifice, addressed to the ancestor who was also the founder of the village, had merged with a *kuti* 'belonging' to the community.

This fusion of *kuci* worship with another type of observance is not an isolated case. As we shall see, it is also entailed in the possession of certain 'great', hereditary medicines, which similarly

779 absorb the appeals to ancestors. This is only another aspect of their
 769 lack of a special 'domain'. And even where *kuci* worship does not
 lose its independence so completely, it yet has little autonomy; for
 the kind of supernatural aid it promises can equally be procured
 by other forms of worship or sacrifice. But of this, too, we shall
 speak later.

Let me conclude the present account with the brief mention of
 769 a further ambiguous practice, a form of sacrifice which stands half-
 777 way between an appeal to *Sokó* and the appeal to *kuci*. It is per-
 779 formed by families in which there are or have been twins and is
 known by that name, *bakomba*. Such houses will possess a special
 845 shrine, consisting of a number of small earthenware pots built into
 the outside wall of a hut, which the women will regularly fill with
 beer and porridge. Once a year, on the birthday of the twins, the
 family head will bring a sacrifice of beer and blood of fowl. Now,
 twins are lucky and a sign of divine benevolence; equally, they
 represent a special incarnation, a concentration as it were of the
 'kinship soul'. In this sacrifice, then, one addresses *Sokó* as well as
 (an anonymous) *kuci*; and the people who have such a twin shrine
 will perform all their sacrifices to *kuci* there, and not over the
 grave of an individual ancestor.

(v) *Spirit Beings*

776 In the preceding discussion we touched upon certain beliefs in
 779 spirits—in 'ancestral spirits', which are an aspect of the personal
 soul, and in 'ghosts', which are transmutations of the shadow soul.
 But when the Nupe mention 'spirits' among the things that make
 up the world they do not mean either of these; they mean
 immaterial beings which exist in their own right and are not
 derived from humans, although they have some quasi-human
 attributes and inhabit the same earth. It is possible that this belief
 is not an original tenet of Nupe creed; for the Nupe call these
 spirit beings by a Hausa-Arabic name, *aljénu* (pl. *aljenúzi*), and
 may well have borrowed certain of their aspects from Islam. How-
 ever this may be, the Nupe do not regard this belief as in any way
 alien or 'borrowed'. And whether the name for spirits is Nupe or
 Arabic, it is a name, sharply distinguishing this class of beings
 from all others.

Though circumstantial and readily expressed, the spirit beliefs
 are fluid and far from uniform. The most varied opinions will not
 be thought unorthodox, but will be taken as evidence for the
 multifariousness of the spirit world. A first group of spirits, vaguely
 anthropomorphic but without distinct individualities, is said to
 inhabit the inanimate parts of nature, hills, trees, watercourses,
 the bush, and so forth. These spirits have sex, and according to

RITUAL

71

This roughly uniform timing of the fixed rituals might suggest that they are bound up with important seasonal events, farming activities and the like, which are similarly uniform throughout the country. The 9th month, which is so regularly accompanied by rituals, in fact represents a crucial phase in the life of a farming people, coinciding with the end of the rains and the time of the sorghum harvest, the staple crop of the country. But the 11th month, which falls in the middle of the dry season, coincides only with a minor agricultural activity, the harvesting of the last bean crop. Conversely, an important agricultural phase, the 1st (or 13th) month, when rains and planting begin, is infrequently accompanied by ceremonials. Other dates marked by rituals in different communities coincide with the first millet harvest (5th month), with the first yam harvest (7th month), or fall in the early rains (3rd month), when nothing in particular happens.

The Nupe rituals are thus neither firmly linked with important agricultural activities nor yet concentrated in the season when farmwork is at a standstill, when the granaries are full, and when the people have both food and time to spare. But there is a nexus of a more general kind; for the Nupe rituals tend to be associated with the reaping of the crops more than with the planting, with 'ends' more than with 'beginnings', bearing upon the renewal of the fertility of which one has just received a token rather than upon attempts to secure it at the outset. The subsequent discussion will bear out this view. Here we must note that the ceremonials which happen to coincide with this or that harvest are in no way strict first-fruit rites, meant to signal the proper time for reaping or to control the first consumption of the new food; nor yet are they special feasts of thanksgiving. Rather is their religious import more unspecific, bearing on fertility, the thriving of crops, and health in general, irrespective of the particular occasion.

2. THE INLAND VILLAGE

(i) *Priestship*

The list of Doko rituals is brief. There are two movable ones — *fitakū* ('The Stone drinks') and *Dibo Saba* (named after an ancestor chief), — and three fixed rituals: *hība*, which is performed twice, in the 5th and 9th month; *sakó*, performed one month after the first *hība*; and *gunnu*, performed in the 11th month.¹

The ceremonials are in the charge of different officiants. The ritual *Dibo Saba*, addressed to an ancestor chief, is also performed by the chief. The ritual *sakó* concerns only the small group of

¹ In our calendar the 5th month corresponds roughly to July–August, the 9th to December, the 11th to February.

x796 paraphernalia. The 'business' of *fitakū* is to break a drought or to combat illness. I witnessed the ritual in July, during the so-called 'little dry season', when the usual spell of dry weather lasted unexpectedly long. The ritual took place at midday, in a clearing in the bush a few minutes walk from Doko. The place formed a rough circle whose entrance was flanked by two fresh mounds of earth. In the centre of the clearing, under a big tree, there was another, old, mound, said to cover the sacred stone from which the ritual derives its name; a small pot was half buried in the mound. The congregation consisted of the *Zigi*, who performed the sacrifice and spoke the prayer, and of family heads and other old men, the village chief not being present. In the sacrifice the blood of the slaughtered animal (a ram) and some beer were poured into the pot in the mound, thus making the 'stone drink', after which the meat was cooked, divided among the men present, and consumed there and then together with the rest of the beer. The priest ate and drank first, the others following in order of rank and age; a share of both meat and beer was kept for the chief, to be taken to his house after the ceremonial. In the prayer which accompanied the sacrifice the beer was referred to as *nuwā*, 'water' (as is usual in all Nupe sacrifices), so that the stone was made to 'drink' the fluid of which one stood in need. The prayer was brief and addressed to both *kuti* and God, thus—

'*Kuti*, the thing we are pouring, drink this water. *Sokó*, cause rain to fall, *kuti*, cause rain to fall. *Sokó*, cause that the whole town may prosper, that everyone may (have things) to eat, that everyone may have health.'

Finally, some leaves were plucked from the tree and stuck into the mound of earth underneath. This action was merely meant as a sign that the ceremony had been performed and had no ulterior or symbolic meaning. The whole ceremonial lasted a little over an hour.

769 According to Doko tradition Dibo Saba was the village chief
x796 who ruled at the time of Tsoede's advent, and the second in a long and (until recently) uninterrupted line of chiefs. It was he who received, at Tsoede's hand, the sacred bangles, and of all the graves of more remote ancestors his alone can still be identified. It lies outside Doko, on the old, now abandoned, site of the village, and today forms a narrow uncultivated space surrounded on all sides by farmland. The ritual is performed whenever some grave danger threatens the community, especially illness or, again, drought. [73] The present chief of Doko performed it in 1930, during an outbreak of smallpox, and again in 1932, when a horse sickness attacked Doko. It was not performed either in 1934 or 1936,